

MENDEL MARANTZ— HOUSEWIFE¹

By DAVID FREEDMAN

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WHAT is a landlord? A bore! He asks you one question all the time—Rent! What is rent? A fine you pay for being poor. What is poverty? Dirt—on the surface. What is 'riches? More dirt—under the surface. Everybody wants money. Money! What is money? A disease we like to catch but not to spread. Just wait, Zelde! The time will come! I'll be a landlord on Riverside Drive! We'll have our own home——”

“In the cemetery!” Zelde said bitterly.

“Not so fast,” Mendel replied, sipping his tea. “Cheer up, Zelde! What is pessimism? A match. It burns the fingers. What is hope? A candle. It lights the way. You never can tell yet! What is life? A see-saw. Today you're poor and tomorrow——”

“You starve!” Zelde muttered, as she rubbed a shirt vigorously against the wash-board.

With a sudden impulse she slapped the shirt into the tub, dried her hands on the apron, and, resting her fists on her hips, turned to Mendel.

“Why shouldn't I be mad?” she began, replying to a previous question. “Here I stand like a fool scrubbing my life away, from morning till night-time, working like a horse, cooking, washing, sewing, cleaning and everything. And for what? For this I eloped with you from a rich father? Did you marry me—or hire me?”

“I stole you. Now I got to pay the penalty. What is love? A conquest. What is marriage? An inquest. Don't worry; your father was no fool. He made believe he didn't

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see us run away. We felt romantic—and he got off cheap! What is romance? Soap-bubbles. They look nice, but taste rotten.”

“Never mind! Mister Mendel Marantz, I know you too good. You talk a lot to make me forget what I was saying. But this whole business must come to a finish right here and there!

“You talked into yourself you’re a great man, so you don’t want to work and you don’t want to listen. Sarah sweats in the factory, Hymie peddles papers, Nathan works by the telegrams. And what do you do? You sit like a king and drink tea and make jokes—and nothing! I betcha you’re waiting Jakie, Lena and Sammy should grow up so you’ll send them to work for you too!”

Mendel shrugged his shoulders.

“What’s a woman’s tongue? A little dog’s tail. It wags too much!”

“I know what I talk. You hate work like poison. You like better to smoke a cigaret and close your eyes and invent schemes how to get rich quick. But you’ll get crazy quicker!”

“Zelde, you’re a old woman. You don’t understand. All I need is one drop of luck and that drop will sweeten our whole ocean of troubles. If only one of my inventions succeeds, none of us will have to work. Then Sarah will have dowry. What is dowry? Every man’s price. And we’ll move out of the fish-market. What is success? Fifth Avenue. What is failure? Fifth floor.

“Some day, you’ll see. I’ll be president of the Refillable Can Company and save the world millions in tin. Just wait!”

“And who’ll buy bread in the meantime? Mendel, remember what I tell you. Knock out this craziness from your head. Forget about this can business!”

Mendel’s dignity was roused.

“Crazy! That’s what you all are! You and all your relatives think I got water on the brain!” He pointed with conviction to his brow. “But up here is the refillable can. Zelde, you see it? It’s in the brain, the whole scheme. Up here is full with ideas, plans and machinery. Thinking,

scheming, planning all the time. It don't let me sleep. It don't let me eat. It don't let me work. And I should forget it—ah?

"You're all jealous because God was good to me. He gave your brother Morris a shoe factory, your cousin Joe He gave a real estate, your sister Dora a rich husband. But God gave me *brains*—and that none of you got!"

Mendel paced the floor excitedly.

Zelde stood silent and bit her lip. For years she had heard the same flow of rhetoric, the same boast of intellect, and the same trust in luck. The net result was always an evasion of work, and the responsibility shifted back to her and the children.

Mendel Marantz had brains, all right. Otherwise, how could he have existed so long without working?

He always confused her with clever phrases and blurred the issue by creating fictitious ones. And he always succeeded in infecting her with his dreams, until she let him dream on while she did the work. It was that way when they had the candy-stand which her brother Gershon bought for them; it was that way when they kept a vegetable-store which sister Dora financed and later reduced to a push-cart; and it was that way now when they had nothing.

By trade a mechanic, by inclination an inventor, and by nature a dreamer, Mendel abhorred the sordid common-places of labor and dreaded the yoke of routine. He had been everything from an insurance agent to a night watchman in rapid succession, and had invented at least a hundred different devices for the betterment of civilization while changing jobs. None of these inventions had as yet received proper recognition, least of all from Zelde. But that could not discourage him to such a point as to drive him to work.

He really believed in his powers. That was the tragedy of it. All geniuses have an unalterable faith in their greatness. But so have most cranks. And Zelde was not sure as to which of the two species Mendel belonged.

She was sure of one thing—that the family was hovering perilously near the brink. A single feather added to its

burdens and it would topple over. Mendel might take it lightly, but she knew better. She had seen families in that neighborhood crumble to ruin over night. She had known many who—like Mendel—started as harmless dreamers, hopeful idlers, and ended—God forbid—as gamblers, drunkards, and worse.

“How was it with Reznick? Every day he had a scheme to make millions while his wife got sick working in the shop. She died working, and the children went to a orphan asylum and he still wanted to make millions. So he made a corner on the coffee-market and he lost everything what everybody else had, and the only way they could stop him from signing checks with Rockefeller’s name was to send him to Bellevue.

“Or Dittenfass? Wasn’t he the picture of Mendel? Didn’t he hate work like poison, and didn’t he pay for it? He thought he was smarter from the rest. Didn’t his wife used to told him, ‘Dittenfass, look out!’? But he laughed only. He looked out for himself only. And one day she threw in his eyes vitriol! That’s what she threw in his eyes, and then he couldn’t look any more!

“You can’t be too smart. Didn’t Karneol try? And it’s two years she’s waitin’ already with swollen eyes he should come back. But he’s got to serve three more.

“The best smartness is to do a day’s work. If you wait it shall happen miracles—it happens! But the wrong way!”

Zelde knew. She wished she didn’t know.

“Maybe you can invent something to make you work,” she offered as a possible solution. “Somebody else with your brains could make a fortune. Why don’t you make at least a living?”

“Brains make ideas; fools can make money. That’s why your relatives are rich. What is business. Blind man’s bluff. They shut your eyes and open your pockets!”

“Again you mix me up,” she said warily, sensing this new attempt to befuddle the issue. “What’s the result from all this? You joke and we starve. It’s lucky Sarah works. If not, we would all be thrown out in the street, already.”

At this moment Sarah entered. She was pale and tired

from the climb of stairs. She dropped her hat languidly on the couch and sank into a chair.

Zelde was too surprised to speak. It was only one-thirty. She never expected Sarah before six. An ominous thought flitted through her mind. She looked anxiously at her daughter. Sarah's gaze shifted to the floor.

An oppressive silence gathered over them. Then Sarah tried to mumble something. But Zelde understood without hearing. Her heart had told her.

"It's slack! Everybody laid off. Sarah, too!"

What she had dreaded most had happened. The family of Marantz was now over the brink. Zelde stood crushed by the thought of the morrow. Sarah sat staring vacantly, her chin against her clenched hand. Mendel stopped smoking to appear less conspicuous.

Four female eyes detected him, however, and scorched him with their gaze.

The handwriting on the wall was unnecessarily large.

Mendel Marantz knew that his crisis was at hand.

Zelde spoke.

"That settles it. Either tomorrow you go to work or go altogether! Yessir! You, I mean, mister!"

Mendel had faced crises before. Some he had overcome with a jest, others with a promise, still others with a pretence at work until the novelty wore off. But there was a grimness in Zelde's manner this time that looked fatal. Nothing but a permanent job and lifelong drudgery could save him now. But that would also destroy him.

Tying him down to a position was like hitching a lion to a cart. His mind could not travel on tracks. It was too restive and spirited. He could never repeat an act without discovering how much easier it might be done by machinery, and immediately he set himself to invent the necessary machine. That was why he could not be a tailor. After he once threaded a needle, he started to devise a simple instrument for doing it, and in the meantime lost his job. And that happened in every case.

His head was so full of ideas that he often had to stand still to keep his balance. His mind sapped all of his powers and left him powerless for work. In order to work he

would have to stop thinking. He might just as well stop living. Idleness was as essential a part of his make-up as industry was of Zelde's.

"I wasn't made for work," he said with finality. "I mean—for just plain work. Some people work with their feet, others with their hands. I work with my head. You don't expect I shall sit like Simon, the shoemaker, every day, and hit nails till I get consumption. One—two—three, I invent a machinery which hits nails, cuts leather, fits heels, makes patches, and I sit down and laugh on the world. I can't work like others, just as others can't work like me!"

"You can make me believe night is day and black is white, but it won't help you. It's a new rule in this house from today on—those who work, eat; those who don't, don't. If you think you can invent food, go ahead. So long I live my children is not going to starve. From today on I'm the father from this family. If you don't want to go to work—I will!"

Mendel was skeptical.

"What is a woman?" he thought. "A lot of thunder, but a little rain."

Still, the shower was more drenching than he supposed.

"Tomorrow morning I go back to be a dressmaker by fancy dresses. Sarah, you come with me. I learn you a real trade."

Then she turned to Mendel with a sneer.

"You thought I play around in the house, didn't you? All right! Now you stay home and play like I did. You want to eat? Cook, yourself. You think in the house it's easy? You'll find out different. Send the children to school, go up on the roof to hang clothes, run down with the garbage five floors, buy groceries, wash underwear, mend stockings, press shirts, scrub floors—go on! Have a good time, and I'll pay the bills!"

Mendel admitted that Zelde had worn for some time the family trousers, but he believed that he still wore the belt. However, her inexorable decision disillusioned him. He admitted having been caught slightly off his guard. He had never suspected that a type of work existed so near

him, into which he might be forced out of sheer necessity. Not that he intended to do it! But still——

"What is a woman?" he reconsidered. "Lightning. It's nice and bright till it hits you."

The next morning Mendel discovered perpetual motion. The children had taken possession of the house. He dodged flying pillows, tripped over upset furniture, slipped on greasy garbage from an overturned can, found salt in his coffee and something sharper on his seat. He kept constantly moving to avoid falling objects and fell into others. He had planned to have nothing to do with the house, but the house was having a great deal to do with him.

The youngsters seemed to be under the impression that with Zelde all law and order had passed away. Mendel found it hard work to change their minds. It was monotonous to spank Lena, then Jakie, then Sammy. Then over again. It would be better to send them off to school. But they had to be dressed and fed and washed for that!

He was tempted to snatch his hat and coat and leave the house. But what would he do in the streets?

He hesitated, gritted his teeth, and set to work by scrubbing Jakie's face till it resembled a carrot.

"What's a wife?" he muttered, and Lena started at the question. "A telescope! She makes you see stars!" And some soap got into his eye.

"Sammy, don't you never marry!" he exclaimed with a profound look of warning at the frightened little boy. "What is marriage? First a ring on the finger and later—on the neck. Lena, stop pulling Jakie's hair. She's like her mother. Don't do that, Sammy. A table-cloth ain't a handkerchief! Ai! Little children, little troubles; big children, big troubles. What is children? Life insurance. Some day they pay you back—when you're dead. But you like them anyhow. Such is life! You know it's tough, but you try it once, anyway.

"After all, what is life? A journey. What is death? The goal. What is man? A passenger. What is woman? Freight.

"Jakie, you bad boy! Don't cry, Lena. He didn't mean it. Here's an apple. Go to school. Sammy, get off the

banister! Look out, children! It's a step missing down there! Who's crying? Jakie, give her back the apple! Did you ever hear such excitements? My goodness!"

Mendel, perspired, exhausted, sank into a chair.

"I'm working, after all," he noted with surprise. "If this lasts, I don't."

But the trials of Mendel Marantz had only begun. The sensation of womanhood did not thrill his bosom, and the charms of housekeeping failed to allure him. A home like a warehouse on moving-day tumbled about him. The beds were upset, the table and floor were littered with breakfast leavings, the cupboard was bare, the dishes were piled in the sink, the dust had gathered already as if cleaning were a lost art, and the general atmosphere was one of dejection, confusion, chaos. The magic touch of the housewife revealed itself by its absence.

Zelde had now proved to him conclusively that her presence and service were essential to his comfort. As if he had ever questioned the fact. Why did she go to all this trouble to drive home a point?

"Zelde, a glass tea," he used to say, and the tea stood steaming hot before him. "Zelde, it's a draft. Shut up the window," and presently the draft was gone.

"Zelde—" he would call, leaning back in his chair, but why torture himself with things that were no more?

That night when Zelde arrived, masculine and business-like, through with work and ready for supper, she beheld a pitiful spectacle.

The house was in hopeless disorder. The children had managed that. The cat was on the table and Jakie was under it, while Lena kept him there with her foot. Sammy's eye had been darkened by a flying saucer which Hymie let go in a moment of abandon. Everything was where it should not be. The kitchen furniture had been moved into the dining room and the feather beds were in the wash-tub.

Mendel was nowhere within the range of Zelde's call.

"Where is papa?" she asked sharply, after calming the youngsters with her two convincing hands. "Everything is upside down. I betcha he didn't do a thing

all day. My goodness, that man will make me crazy!"

A crashing sound as of dishes in hasty descent issued from the next room.

Zelde and her retinue rushed to the scene of disaster. With one foot in the sink and the other on the wash-tub Mendel Marantz was poised on high, searching through the closet. Dishes, pans, bottles and rags lay scattered in ruined fragments beneath him.

Zelde blazed.

"Gozlen!" she almost shrieked. "What do you want up there!"

Mendel steadied himself. His heart having missed a beat, he waited a moment, then answered quietly, "Iodin."

"What for iodine, what for?" She was still furious, but also a little anxious.

"A small scratch," he explained without moving. "My finger got caught—under the meat-chopper."

"Oi! You clumsy! And what's all the rags and the water on the floor?"

"To put by my side and my leg. I—slipped and—the gas-range fell on me. My ankle turned around. The soup was good and hot. Maybe you got something for burns?"

Zelde was a little less furious and a little more anxious.

"Then what are you climbing on the walls for? Go in bed. Go—you look broken in pieces!"

She sighed heavily and shook her head.

"After all, he's only a man," she soliloquized. "What can you expect? He don't know if he's alive!"

She continued to scold, but nursed him tenderly.

"How is it? You're an inventor, and you don't know how to light the gas without blowing up the house? A man who can't help nobody else can't help himself!"

After a pause she said, "Maybe I should stay home? Ah?"

"Maybe," he murmured weakly.

Zelde vacillated.

"So what'll be if I stay home?" she prodded.

"It'll be better."

"That I know, but what'll be with you?"

"I'll get well."

"And—?" She expected him not only to recover, but to reform.

"And if I get well I'll feel good. What is health? A garden. What is sickness? A grave. What is a good wife? A gardener. What is a bad wife? A grave-digger."

"He's as bad as ever," she thought.

She finally resolved, "It's not such a terrible! He won't die from it and we can't live from it. He'll learn a lesson and I'll earn a living."

And the experiment continued.

It was very hard on Mendel. It was harder on Sarah and hardest on Zelde. But time subdued Mendel's protests and improved his work.

Zelde was surprised at his altered attitude of gradual submission. It almost alarmed her. She had never really intended this radical change to last. She had expected Mendel to rebel more and more violently as time went on and finally to make a break for his freedom and exclaim, "I'm sick and tired of this slavery. I'm going to work!"

Instead he was getting actually to like it. By degrees Zelde found less to do in the house after her return from the shop. True, his work was crude and slovenly to her practiced eye. She never would have cleaned dishes as he did, with a whisk-broom, or swept dirt under the table, or boiled soup in a coffee-pot, or wiped the floor with a perfectly good skirt.

But withal, Mendel was doing things, and as his domestic craftsmanship improved, Zelde grew more disappointed and depressed. She felt that he was planning to displace her permanently. She pictured him bending over the wash-tub as she used to do; or arranging the dishes in the closet, which was once her favorite diversion; or scouring the pots and pans as only she knew how, and a genuine feeling of envy and longing seized her.

"Thief!" she was tempted to cry. "Go out from my kitchen! Give me back my apron and let alone my house-work!"

For she had become nothing more than a boarder in that home, to be tolerated merely because she earned the rent. She saw the children only at supper-time, and they

looked curiously at her as if they hardly recognized her.

At table all eyes were turned to pa.

"Papa, Sammy took my spoon!"

"Take his," Mendel decreed.

"Pa, I want some more meat!"

"Take mine."

"Pop, Lena stealed my bread!"

"Take hers."

"Pa-ah! The thoup ith too hot. I tan't eat it!" Jakie complained, and turned a bruised tongue to his father.

"Take some water from the sink," was Mendel's motherly advice.

Zelde felt like a stranger. They did not seem to know that she was present. She tried to interfere.

"Don't put water in soup, Jakie! Better blow on it."

But the little boy slipped down from the chair without noticing her, wriggled out from under the table, and soon returned, gaily carrying a cup of sink-water.

Her maternal instinct rebelled.

"No!" she said warningly, as Jakie tilted the cup over the plate of bean-soup.

But the child, with his eyes fixed on Mendel, poured the contents bravely.

Zelde slapped his hand, and the cup fell with a clatter. It was not a hard blow, but an impulsive one. It created a strained and awkward silence. Jakie burst into tears. He ran to Mendel and buried his little face in daddy's lap. Lena began to whimper in sympathy.

Something snapped in Zelde. Her appetite was gone. She rose and went into the bedroom and shut the door behind her.

She did not want them to hear her sobs.

It had all turned out so different!

Instead of driving Mendel to work she had driven herself into exile. Mendel the housewife was now further from ever getting a man's job than Mendel the idler had ever been. Zelde felt she had made a grave mistake. Rather should she have permitted him to idle and mope—he would have tired of it eventually—than that he should be wrongly occupied and contented.

If only she could undo what she had done, she'd be satisfied.

"After all, a house to manage is for a woman," she began, bent upon re-establishing the old order. "A man should do housework? It can make him crazy yet!"

"I believe you," Mendel conceded.

"It don't look like housework should agree with you," she observed.

"Looks is deceiving."

There was a pause. A good deal of understanding passed between them.

"Mendel, hard work will kill you yet," she insisted.

"So will idleness—in the long run. What is death? An appointment. You got to keep it some time."

"But you don't look good."

"I don't feel bad."

Zelde became a little dizzy. Did he mean to say that he intended to stick to housework? She tried to tempt him.

"Wouldn't you like, like you used to, to have nothing to do, and sit and cross your legs, and, without you should move, somebody should bring you hot tea?"

Mendel blew rings of smoke at the ceiling.

Zelde continued, scarcely breathing.

"And wouldn't you like to lie on the couch with your hands together behind your head and look on the sky from the window and dream what a great inventor you are?"

An impressive silence followed. On Mendel's face were fleeting traces of an inner struggle.

"And—I'll clean the house," she added softly to clear any doubts that he might still have.

Mendel shook his head.

"It'll be too hard for you," he said gallantly.

"It's not such a terrible!"

"I haven't the heart to let you," he complained feebly.

"You'll get over it."

His tone became firmer.

"No! Housework is not for a woman. Like the Masora says, 'Be good to your wife and give your children to eat.' That means a man should clean the house and cook for

his children. What is a wife? A soldier. Her place is on the field. What is a husband? A general. His place is at home!"

Zelde was chagrined.

"So this is the future what you aimed for?" she chided. "To be a washerwoman and a porter! Pooh! You ought to be ashamed to look on my face! Think what people say! They don't know which is what! If I am the husband or if you are the wife or how!"

Mendel carefully rolled a new cigarette. There was a plaintive note in her anger. He could afford to be defiant.

"Didn't you make me to stay home and work? So! I'm working! What is work? Pleasure!— If you know how!"

And he struck a match.

Zelde sat down to avoid falling down.

"Work is pleasure," echoed through her mind like an explosion. Maybe solitary confinement at home every day had gone to his head. Or maybe—maybe—! She slowly repeated to herself his sally. "What is work? Pleasure!" and "What is pleasure?" she wondered. The shock of the answer almost made her scream.

So that was it! She had suspected something, but *that* would never have occurred to her in a million years. Those floor-brushes that she found the other day under the bed, and the mop and the tin pail. They did not belong to the house. To whom *did* they belong? She had certainly seen them somewhere before. Now she knew! At the janitor's!

"No wonder he likes to stay home," she muttered to herself. "I should have knew; it's a bad sign if Mendel likes work all of a sudden!"

Her suspicions were still hypothetical, but fragments of evidence were fast falling in to shape an ominous and accusing picture.

One day, upon her return from work, Zelde found Mendel sitting near the window, restfully smoking a cigarette. His legs were crossed under his apron and his arms were folded over his lap. He gazed wistfully out upon the city.

Zelde looked about her in astonishment. The house was

tidy, the kitchen spick and span, the wash dried and ironed, the floor freshly scrubbed. A model housewife would have envied the immaculate perfection of the work.

Zelde gasped. So early in the day and already through with all his work! And what work!

"Sarah, I wonder who did it," she finally said to her daughter when she had somewhat regained her composure.

Her groping suspicions now became a startling conviction. Evidence fairly shrieked at her from every corner.

"Only a woman could do this," she thought, overcome by the shock of the revelation.

"Who do you think?" Sarah asked innocently.

"Did you see the way she looks at me?" Zelde exclaimed with mounting fury. "No wonder she laughs in my face. No wonder she tells all the neighbors, 'Such a fool! She works and he plays!' No wonder!"

"What are you talking about?" Sarah inquired, bewildered.

"Never mind! Your father knows what I mean! *She* did it! Rifke! The janitor's wife! I know her, all right. She made eyes to Mister Mendel Marantz lots of times! She's older from me by four years, but she paints up like a sign and makes her hair Buster Brown and thinks the men die for her. Ask your father. He knows!"

Mendel sat dumbfounded. His eyes opened like mouths.

"Don't make believe you're innocent. I know you men too good," Zelde broke out violently. "I slave like a dog and that dirty old—" Tears of rage stifled her. But with a swift change of tone she added, her finger shaking under Mendel's nose, "Mister Marantz, remember, you'll be sorry for this." And she walked out of the room.

Mendel was sorry for her. He turned a puzzled face to Sarah. "When the house was upside down she said I made her crazy. Now when it's fixed up she tries to make me crazy! What's a wife? An epidemic. If it don't break out here, it breaks out there!"

The next day Zelde fidgeted at her work. She was prompted to fling it aside, rush home, and catch them together—Mendel and Rifke—and pull out the old vixen's hair and scratch out her eyes. But she bided her time.

Mendel was, no doubt, expecting a surprise attack and perhaps had warned his paramour to stay away.

Zelde decided to be wily. She would make believe that she had forgotten and forgiven. But how could she?

That night, on the landing of the fourth floor, she met Rifke coming down from the fifth. There were only two tenants on the fifth floor—Mrs. Peril Tzvack, a widow who hated Rifke and would never let her into her house, and Mendel Marantz. From which of the two was Rifke coming?

As Zelde entered her home the same neatness, the same cleanliness and smartness stung her sight. In fact, she herself could not have done better. To be honest—not even as good. The house was a mirror of spotlessness. It was so obviously the accomplishment of the wicked woman she had met on the stairs that Zelde spent a tortured and sleepless night.

She went to work the next morning with a splitting headache, and mists swam before her eyes as she tried to sew. Weird thoughts revolved in her mind. If it were only a question of Mendel, she would not hesitate a moment to leave him forever. But the children! A daughter of marriageable age and the tiny ones! What would people say? And even Mendel. True, there was no excuse—absolutely none—for his abominable treachery. She would never forgive him! Still, Rifke, that superannuated flirt, was the kind of woman that could turn any man's head! With that double chin of hers and the shaved neck and a dimple like a funnel in her cheek! That's what the men liked!

After all, Mendel was a helpless male, all alone in a house. He probably did not know the first thing about housekeeping and would have starved or been buried in dirt if he had not appealed to somebody to help him. And Rifke was just the type to take advantage of a defenceless man in such a predicament. She doubtless opened her eyes at him like two coal-scuttles, and pursed her lips—she had a way of doing it which gave the women of the neighborhood heart failure. And Mendel must have been grateful and kind to her for her assistance, and she must

have mistaken his attitude for something else. She always misunderstood kindness from men.

So that's how Mendel managed to clean the house so well! And that's why work was pleasure to him! Judging by the amount and quality of the work Rifke was doing for him, their affection for each other must have developed to an alarming degree.

Zelde visualized the hateful scenes of faithlessness in which Mendel probably danced fawningly about Rifke, the fifty-three-year-old "vamp," who cleaned dishes and washed clothes for him as a reward. She must have nudged him with her elbow while she boiled the wash and said invitingly, "Mendel, dear, why are you blind to beauty?"

And Mendel, edging closer, must have answered, "What is beauty? Wine! The older it gets, the rarer it is!" Then pressing his cheek against hers, he undoubtedly added, with tenderness, "You're so fat! It's a pleasure to hold you around! What is a man? Dynamite. What is a woman? A burning match. What is passion? The explosion!"

"Stop it! Your whiskers tickle me," she probably replied with a coquettish laugh, and slapped him playfully over the hands with a rinsed shirt.

But she was only jesting, and was perhaps ecstatic with joy when Mendel courageously kissed her on the cheek despite her protests, and exclaimed, "What is a kiss? A smack for which you turn the other cheek!" And she probably turned it.

Then Rifke amorously rested her head on his chest and looked up with those devilish eyes of hers, and, linking her plump arms about his neck, she whispered, "Love me, Mendel, love me! I am yours!"

And Mendel, planting his feet more solidly to bear her weight, and carried away by the flames of desire, must have gripped her in his passionate embrace and murmured in a throaty voice, "What is love? A broom. It sweeps you away!"

"What's the matter with you, Zelde?" cried Marcus, the tailor, biting the thread from a seam. "You stitched the skirt to a sleeve and you're sewing up the neck of the waist!"

"You look white like a ghost!"

Zelde drew herself up, as out of a lethargy.

"Eh! W—where am I? Oh!"

And her face sank into her palms.

Instantly there was a tumult in the shop.

A startled group of frightened men and women gathered about her.

But Zelde regained her self-control without aid, and pale and faint though she was, she smiled weakly to reassure them all.

"It's nothing. A dizziness. I'm better," she said. But Sarah insisted upon taking her home at once.

"That's right," Marcus advised. "Go home and take a hot tea with lemon. It'll sweat you out."

He added in an undertone to his neighbor, "It's a shame! Such a fine woman! She's got a husband who's a nix!"

Zelde refused to have Sarah accompany her home.

"We can't afford you shall lose a half day," she argued. But the real reason was that she did not wish her daughter to behold her father's infamy.

At eleven o'clock Zelde left. As she neared the house her breath became short and rapid. She stumbled several times going up the stairs. She stopped at the door.

Was it voices or was it her imagination?

No. Yes. It was. A man's voice, then a woman's laughter, then some—oh! She could stand it no longer. She broke wildly into the room and dislodged a bulky person who had been leaning against the door. Zelde stood electrified.

It was Rifke. And she was laughing in her face! And there was Mendel. And the janitor, too—Rifke's husband. And two men! With stovepipe hats and cutaways and spats! Detectives, no doubt! Brought by the janitor to catch his wife and arrest Mendel! Oh, heavens! And there was Morton, Mendel's nephew, a lawyer!

"Oi! A lawyer in the case!" she moaned to herself. "Then everything is lost!"

Zelde was ready to drop, but Mendel took her by the hand, and she heard him say, "This is my wife. It's all her fault. She drove me to it."

"We want you to come with us now," one of the strangers said to Mendel.

"What's the matter here, anyhow?" Zelde exclaimed at last.

"I got to go with these people," Mendel replied. "But you can ask—Rifke," he added significantly. "She knows all about it."

Mendel, his nephew and the two gentlemen departed before Zelde had time to protest. She turned with burning eyes to Rifke—the hussy!

"I wish they could take my husband where they take yours," Rifke began by way of explanation. "You don't know what kind of a husband you got. It's gonna be in all the papers. He did something. Those men what was here watched him, and when they seen it they jumped up like crazy."

"What did he do?" Zelde asked in great alarm. "I betcha you made him to do it."

"I? He says you made him. I only brought up the people. They knock by me in the door. They say, 'Do Mendel Marantz live here? Where is it?' So I bring them up."

"What for did you bring them up—what for? A blind one could see it's detectives!" Zelde muttered angrily.

"How shall I know it who they are? When they came in your husband turned white like milk. 'Are you the man which done it?' they ask him, and he says, shivering, 'Yes.'"

Zelde wrung her hands.

"What for did he say 'Yes'—what for?"

"Because it's true," Rifke explained.

"What's true?"

"That he done it."

"What did he done—what? You'll make me crazy yet. Why don't you tell me?"

"But I told you already!"

"When did you told me—when? You're talkin' and talkin' and it don't come out nothing! What happened here? What did they want here? Why is your husband here? Why are you here? Why were they here? What's the matter here, altogether, anyway?"

"It's a whole lot the matter—with you!" Rifke exclaimed impatiently. "Come over here and look and maybe it'll open your eyes!"

She led the dazed Zelde into the kitchen.

"You see it?" Rifke asked triumphantly, pointing out a mass of wrinkled canvas in the middle of the room.

"What shall I see?" Zelde answered skeptically. "Rags, I see!"

"But under the rags!" Rifke insisted. She lifted the canvas. Zelde stood completely bewildered. Her eyes opened wide, then her face reddened. A feeling of indignation welled up in her.

"You can't make a fool from me!" she began at last with rising momentum. "What do you show me—what? An ash-can on wheels! What's that got to do with you and my husband? Don't think I don't know! You show me this, I should forget *that!*"

Rifke began to perspire. She mopped her face with her apron as she struggled to keep calm.

"You don't know what I'm talkin' about and I don't know what you're talkin' about. It's mixed up, everything! Where do you see a ash-can? This ain't a ash-can! It looks, maybe, like it. But it ain't. All my friends should have such ash-cans! It's a wonder in the world!"

Zelde's head was reeling.

"So what is it, I'm asking you?" she gasped helplessly.

"It's a whole business!" Rifke replied. "We seen it, my husband Shmeril and me and the people which was here. Your husband showed us. He winds up the can like a phonograph and it begins to play. The dishes go in dirty and they come out clean like after a bath. You see it? On these straps the dishes take a ride. They go in from the back and come out on the front. When it's finished the dishes, your husband opens the box—I thought a man will jump out from it—but it's only wheels and straps and wires and pipes inside! Did you ever?"

"Then he pulls off the feet and the box sits down on the floor, and he takes out the straps from the back door and puts in such a board with bumps and brushes, and he turns the handle and the box rides around like a automobile and

washes up the floor till it shines! I tell you the people was standing and looking—I thought their eyes would fall out!

"Then your husband stands up the box and puts back the feet and takes out the bumpy board and sticks in a whole machinery with pipes and wheels and winds up the machine and pumps in fresh water and throws in all the old clothes, and you hear inside such a noises, and then the clothes come out like frankfurters, clean and washed and ready to hang! Such a business! You don't have to work no more! It works itself! I wouldn't mind to have such a box by me!"

Zelde, dumb with amazement, gazed at the mute, ugly monster before her. She recognized the wheels from the old baby-carriage; the legs were from her kitchen chair; the handle from the stove. And now she remembered the can, the brushes, and the mops that Rifke had probably discarded, and that Mendel had used in the creation of this freak.

So this was the rival she had been jealous of, the usurper of her rights!

"It makes in five minutes what I do a whole day," Rifke rambled along. "They call it such a fancy name—Combination House-Cleaner. It cleans everything. The strangers is from a company which goes to make millions cans like this.

"You're gonna be rich, Mrs. Marantz!

"Who would think from house-cleaning you could get rich! Here I'm cleaning houses for twenty-nine years and I never thought from such a scheme! You gotta have luck, I tell you!"

"And I thought all the time it was Rifke! Oi, Mendel, you must think I'm such a fool!"

"Forget it. If not for you I never would have did what I done. You made me to do it."

"I didn't, Mendel."

She added in a caressing tone:

"Your laziness did it, Mendel. You invented that machine because you were too lazy to work."

"What's a wife? An X-Ray. She knows you through and through!"